

Committee: Sustainable Communities Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: 18th January 2022

Wards: ALL

Subject: Allotment Gardens

Lead officer: John Bosley, Assistant Director of Public Space

Contact officer: Claire Walshe

Recommendations:

A. That the Committee note and comment on the report.

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. Allotments across the borough provide a vital place for plot holders to undertake urban horticulture, growing food and plants for both leisure and functional reasons. They are also an important green infrastructure used by birds, mammals and invertebrates, enhancing the biodiversity within our communities.
- 1.2. This valuable community resource also provides ‘*green exercise*’ opportunities to improve health outcomes and acts as a social contact point, aiding in improving an individual’s mental health and supporting their independence.
- 1.3. Allotments are oversubscribed and the service has undertaken proactive work over the last year to positively address this, welcoming 163 new plot holders over this period.
- 1.4. The network of allotments can be improved and the council’s Greenspaces team will continue to look at opportunities to improve how the sites are used and associations can be supported.

2 DETAILS

2.1. History of Allotment Gardens

- 2.2 Allotments have been in existence for hundreds of years with the system we recognise today stemming from the introduction of the Allotments Act 1887, which provided the mechanism for compulsory purchase of land to enable allotments and a responsibility to provide allotments if there was sufficient demand. The Small Holdings and Allotments Act of 1908 further provided the mechanism to enable a national network of sufficient allotments for the provision of growing food for domestic consumption, superseded this. This allowed labouring poor to be self-sufficient during the heyday of the industrial revolution and enable a strategic infrastructure during both World Wars.
- 2.3 In 1922, the Allotments Act in England and Wales, gave better rights for allotment holders but the most important change came in a revision to the

Act in 1925, which established statutory allotments which local authorities could not sell off or convert without Ministerial consent, known as Section 8 Orders.

2.5 Further legislation has been listed over the intervening years, which have affected allotments, the latest of which is the Localism Act 2011 in relation to the compulsory acquisition of land.

3. OVERVIEW OF ALLOTMENT SERVICES IN MERTON

3.1 The Allotments Service is currently managed by idverde Ltd as the grounds maintenance contractor for the council as part of the South London Waste Partnership suite of contracts (Phase C, Lot 2).

3.2 Allotments are available for residents residing within the borough and all of the council managed sites having an applicable waiting lists. Residents can apply to one (1) waiting list and, unfortunately, some popular locations have waiting lists that are currently closed as the estimated time for an available allotment exceeds five (5) years.

3.3 There are 18 allotment sites in the borough, 13 of these are operated by the council through its agent idverde Ltd and five (5) are self-managed sites as outlined in table one (1) below.

3.4 Across these sites, there are 1,454 plots, utilising approximately 28 hectares of land to facilitate urban leisure gardening for the benefit of borough residents.

Table 1. Merton Council Allotments

Site Name	Management	Hectares	Total Plots
Brooklands Ave. Allotments	Merton Council	0.25	19
Cannizaro Park Allotments	Merton Council	0.7	42
Cannon Hill Common Paddock Allotments	Self-Managed	2.13	107
Cottenham Park Allotments	Merton Council	4.32	309
Durnsford Road Allotments	Merton Council	0.89	57
Eastfields Allotments	Merton Council	1	55
Effra Road Allotments	Merton Council	0.15	12
Eveline Rd Allotment Gardens	Merton Council	0.5	31
George Hill East & West Allotments	Self-Managed	2.4	116

Haslemere Ave. Allotments	Merton Council	0.92	9
Havelock Road Allotments	Merton Council	1.86	96
Martin Way East Allotments	Self-Managed	1.26	235
Martin Way West Allotments	Self-Managed	3.16	
New Barnes Ave. Allotments	Merton Council	0.94	61
Phipps Bridge Rd. Allotments	Merton Council	2.19	84
Tamworth Farm Allotments	Self-Managed	2.86	88
Thurlston Road Allotments	Self-Managed	0.59	47
Western Road Allotments	Merton Council	1.53	86
		27.65	1454

- 3.5 Historically, allotments are rented by the 'rod' or 'perch', which is an ancient unit of measurement based on the tool utilised by farmers to control the oxen plough team. Council plots are typically comprised of either 10 rod (approximately 250 square metres/ 30ft x 90ft) or 5 rod (approximately 125 square metres/ 30ft x 45ft).
- 3.6 The service, in order to meet current demand, prioritises the renting of 5 rod plots to enable more residents to start allotmenting.
- 3.7 The current costs for residents associated with renting allotments comprises an annual basic rent and a levy for water use with the annual period commencing on the 1st October in each calendar year. Below in table two (2) below are the recent annual rental rates associated with renting an allotment plot. The concession rate is available for allotment holders that have either a disability, those aged 60+ years or those not in full-time employment (holding an ES40 entitlement or supplementary benefits) and juniors.

Table 2. Annual Rental rates for Allotment Plot(s)

	Basic Rate	Concession Rate	Water Rate
2017/2018	£19.30	£13.50	£1.30
2018/2019	£19.86	£13.90	£1.68
2019/2020	£22.00	£15.50	£3.40
2020/2021	£22.00	£15.50	£6.80
2021/2022	£22.44	£15.81	£6.94

- 3.8 Further allotment information, including map links to site locations, is available to residents on the council website - [Allotments | Merton Council](#)

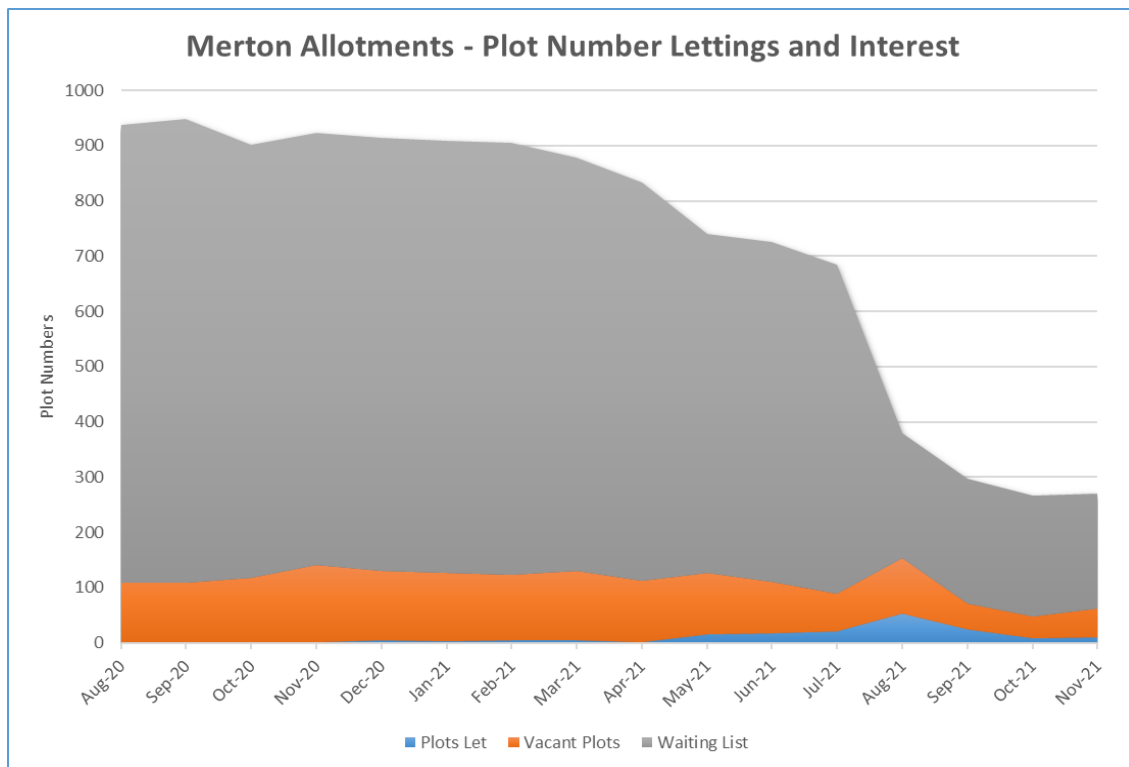
4 MANAGEMENT OF MERTON'S ALLOTMENT SITES

- 4.1 The council's service provider, idverde Ltd, are contracted to carry out the cutting of pathways and hedges, mowing and maintenance at all allotment sites maintained by the borough. They also manage the administration of relevant allotment tenancies, including inspection and non-cultivation notices, notices to quit, supply and issue of keys, processing tenancy agreements, and dispute resolution.
- 4.2 Idverde also provide a collection of on-site waste bays at allotments sites in Merton on a bi-monthly basis.
- 4.3 Idverde Ltd are responsible for invoicing allotment tenants on an annual basis and collecting rent acting as the agent on behalf of the council. The rental monies received for the annual rental of allotment tenancies.
- 4.4 The management of allotments is reported to the council contract client team through the Annual Report process, as well as reporting to the council at monthly contract meetings. The monthly contract meeting focuses on reviewing the progress on the letting of available allotment plots and the waiting list for plots.
- 4.5 Idverde Ltd work in partnership with Greenspaces and Facilities Management colleagues in Merton for management of water at all allotment sites including turning the water off and on to coincide with the growing season and to prevent freezing and burst pipes, and any issues with this infrastructure are reported to the Authorising Officer.

5 APPLICATIONS TO THE ALLOTMENT SERVICE

- 5.1 Allotment space in Merton is, and has historically been, oversubscribed. The service has been working to alleviate the long waiting list by ensuring that plots are released more quickly and that the waiting list is actively managed. The chart below illustrates the progress made within the service to both improve the management of the waiting list and to increase available lettings of plots.
- 5.2 In early 2021 following the 2021 Annual Review, the council client team required further improvement by idverde to improve the rate of plot letting and the management of stagnant waiting lists. Idverde sent offer letters to the potential plot holders at the top of waiting list for nearly every site in Merton. Those people on the waiting list had 14 days allowed to respond to re-confirm that they wished to remain on the waiting list and were able take up an offer for a plot if available.

Chart 1. Plot lettings (August 2020 to November 2021)

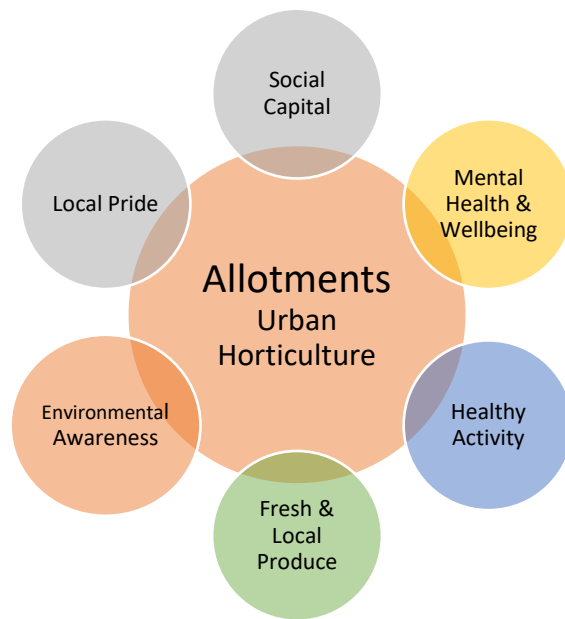


- 5.3 This processed resulted in an increased number of plot viewings and an improved rate of new plot rentals. Over this period. It was anticipated that by the end of April 2021 there would be a substantial uplift in the number of vacant plots filled.
- 5.4 Following this endeavour, the council received a further update in August 2021 that the waiting list had been significantly reduced following the actions detailed above.
- 5.5 There was one final push to get vacant plots filled during September prior to the invoicing season, during which no one will be contacted. This period is between October and January.
- 5.6 To this end, idverde carried out a programme of actively communicating with customers on the waiting lists to reassess customer interest in securing an allotment plot, while also improving the assessment of plots that were either left fallow or required improvement. Identified plots that required preparation to allow for a new rental were prioritised and, from February 2021 to date, has resulted reducing the waiting list by 75% and reducing vacant plots by 50%.
- 5.7 The improvements made during this period has enabled 163 new customers to rent allotment plots and enjoy allotmenting, enjoying our outdoor community space and using our valuable green infrastructure in a healthy and positive way.

6 HEALTH BENEFITS OF ALLOTMENT GARDENS

- 6.1 There are a huge number of benefits to gardening and allotment gardening, as set out on the National Allotment Society website (nsalg.org.uk).

Chart 2. Benefits of Allotments



- 6.2 Social Capital – Allotmenting has the benefit to individuals of being a part of something, a collective with purpose, whilst also maintaining personal independence. This is particularly true for individuals who have retired, work, or live in non-traditional social norms. Successful allotment societies often volunteer at their site, spending time together for the benefit of others and the improvement of the site. The social contact and sense of togetherness as benefits to both the individual and the group.
- 6.3 Mental Health & Wellbeing – The pressures of a hectic modern life are well established and also well documented are the positive benefits of being in nature and, specifically, the benefit that individuals receive through gardening. Allotments provide a focal point to enable residents to enjoy these benefits. The University of Sheffield study (November 2020, *British Food Journal*) documents the benefits that plot holders receive whilst working their plots. Further details can be found here - [Allotments are good for you – and for your mental health](#).
- 6.4 In addition, there is a benefit to users from the knowledge and skills gained from tending an allotment, practically demonstrated by the produce and plants produced. The self-worth and achievement gained has a significant benefit to the allotment holder.
- 6.5 Healthy Activity – The need for regular attendance to have an allotment perform well is a valuable source of ‘green exercise’ for plot holders. In addition to the benefits allotmenting has on improving mood and self-esteem, the regularity of physical exercise is important to users, keeping people mobile and independent, as long as plot holders cover-up from the sun.

- 6.6 Fresh & Local Produce – It is well known through the nation’s *Dig for Victory* campaign, allotments can be pivotal in providing foods for families and the same is true today. Importantly, the food grown locally is often free of pesticides and is not cultivated with artificial chemicals that large-scale agriculture operations use. The environmental impact is less, there is a benefit to the user through healthy eating, and the wider community benefits in limiting the amount of carbon associated with food.
- 6.7 Environmental Awareness & Local Pride – The personal positive benefits for users working in an outdoor environment have been established, but in addition there is a net positive relationship with flora and fauna which profits from the environment created by the borough network of allotments. The wildlife present in allotments is also well documented, from slow worms, frogs, toads, field mice, birds, bees and invertebrates, which contributes to a richness in bio-diversity in our communities.
- 6.8 Allotment tending is a year-round activity and provides the user with a connection to the natural environment and the importance of preserving our environment. Civic pride, positive environmental action, reuse & recycling and an awareness of the threat of climate change empowers and encourages allotment holders to take positive steps to minimise their impact on the environment. The sense of community and Local Pride is inherent with site users and is an incalculable benefit that users provide society. Acting as custodians of our green infrastructure for future generations and being champions of these valuable spaces is an inherent benefit that users provide our local communities.
- 6.9 Allotments during the pandemic have also provided a refuge to plot holders, a place where they could exercise during lockdown and spend time safely distanced but in social contact with their fellow gardeners.

7 WILDLIFE ON ALLOTMENTS (INFORMATION SOURCES FROM NATIONAL SOCIETY OF ALLOTMENT AND LEISURE GARDENERS LTD).

- 7.1 Although the primary purpose of allotment sites is to grow food, they offer many other benefits. Their contribution to supporting wildlife in urban areas is significant. They habitat environments and wildlife corridors, creating links with parks, tracks, hedgerows, churchyards and rivers.
- 7.2 Plot-holders can help to support wildlife and ensure a balanced eco-system that will reduce pests and diseases and increase productivity by following some simple steps.
- 7.3 Allotment sites can make communal efforts to be wildlife friendly by managing hedges appropriately and setting aside un-mown grassy areas to nurture insects and amphibians; a patch of nettles will provide both plant food and a breeding area for butterflies. Orchard areas managed in a traditional way provide potential breeding sites for many different species of wildlife.

8 FUTURE OPTIONS

- 8.1 The self-management or devolved management of community allotments is an important next step for the service to consider, especially considering the general interest in allotments as demonstrated by the long waiting lists for plots and the financial pressures that wider council services need to balance.
- 8.2 The outcomes of devolved management has many potential benefits to community allotments, including local management of the letting process, retention of rental income to invest into the community allotment, improved engagement and involvement of plot holders. Properly managed and implemented devolved managed allotments allow groups to address derelict areas for the benefit of the plot holders and for enhanced community use, while also providing associations improved access to external funding to develop the site.
- 8.3 There are levels of devolved management that can be developed and this approach may not be right for all sites. It is important to state that any suggested move toward this model will need to be underpinned by meaningful consultation and communication. For illustrative purposes, the broad levels of potential self-management includes;

Level 1 - There is a site representative who liaises with the council and the plot holders informally accept responsibility for minor maintenance works. The association promotes good gardening and sustainable use of plots on the site; they administer the waiting list with the service provider (idverde). There is a developed mechanism by which site representatives are consulted on capital expenditure.

There is no written devolved management agreement between the association and the council and no financial responsibilities.

Level 2 - The association accepts formal responsibility for a range of duties, which include collecting rents on behalf of the landlord, administering the waiting list, allocates plots and supports new tenants. To raise funds and administer the finance allocated by the council. Routine maintenance and possibly taking responsibility for water bills. A proportion of rental income is provided for this purpose but this model leaves the council to carry out major works and undertake all legal formalities. A written devolved management agreement or license between the association and the council is required. This model requires a formal constitution to establish responsibilities and obligations it will also require a bank account and a proper system of financial management.

Level 3 - The allotment association leases the site from the council, arranges tenancy agreements, collects rents and reinvests revenue on maintenance, repair and capital items. Depending upon the term of the lease, plot holders may become the tenants of the association rather than of the council. The council retains defined oversight and strategic functions through establishing a strategic management agreement. A devolved management agreement between the association and the

council is essential and there is the requirement for investment from the council in beginning, as it is unlikely that the rental income will be sufficient to fund short-term requirements. This can be undertaken by a support grant, possibly in the form of endowment. This option is more complex, initially, but provides the longest strategic benefit.

9 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

9.1 Not applicable for this report.

10 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

10.1 Not applicable for this report.

11 TIMETABLE

11.1 The National Allotments Week (2022) is scheduled for August 9th to the 14th. The Greenspaces team will be developing ideas on how to raise awareness of urban horticulture across the borough and the benefit that allotments provide users and the wider community.

12 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

12.1 The substantive network of allotments across the borough has a significant potential cost and risk to the Council. Costs associated with the operational management of allotments include water supplies, utilities, infrastructure and boundary fencing. It is important to note these risks and that they are managed through the constant review of the operations and the survey of infrastructure.

12.2 In terms of rental incomes associated with allotments, the annual fees recovered are not significant in comparison to the expenditure in managing the services. Water charges are applied on a full-cost recovery model. The below table provides an overview of income associated with the service.

Table 3. Annual Fees & Charges associated with Allotments

Year	Rent	Water Charge	Combined Charges
2020/21	£55,277	£20,075	£75,392
2021/22	£60,282	£22,199	£82,481

13 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

13.1 See section 2.1 regarding history and relevant legislation. The below are the primary legislative mechanisms associated with the provision of allotments.

13.2 The Small Holdings and Allotments Act 1908 deals with the provision of Allotments, powers of councils and acquisition of land to fulfil statutory requirements.

- 13.3 The Allotments Act 1925 specifies that land purchased or appropriated by local authorities for use as allotments must not be disposed of without Ministerial consent. The Secretary of State must be satisfied that 'adequate provision will be made for allotment holders displaced by the action of the local authority, or that such provision is unnecessary or not reasonably practicable'.

14 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

- 14.1 We positively welcome and aim to support the growing diversity of the community we serve and the people we employ.
- 14.2 We aim to provide an inclusive service and will not discriminate (indirectly, directly or by association) on the grounds of race, sex, gender reassignment, marital or partnership status, sexual orientation, age, religion or belief, HIV status, or disability (e.g. sensory and physical disabilities, learning disabilities and mental health status).
- 14.3 Quality means equality in the services we plan and provide, and in the staff, we employ to provide those services.

15 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 15.1 Not applicable for this report.

16 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

- 16.1 Not applicable for this report.

17 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

- 17.1 Appendix 1 – Summary of Allotment Protocol.

18 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 18.1 A borough-wide map of allotment locations can be found here - [The Allotment Map of Merton Council](#)